

Proper 11 - 8 Pentecost – Year C – July 21, 2010 - Homily
Amos 8:1-2; Psalm 52; Colossians 1:15-28; Luke 10:38-42
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For those of us who have been around the Episcopal Church for a while, you already know that there is a standing joke about the classic Episcopalian sermon, along the lines of it will usually have three points and will often include a poem! It must be our Trinitarian heritage coming out, and so not wishing to disappoint anyone, amazingly enough the message for this evening actually has three points, includes a Scriptural poem from Colossians, but just to break the mold a little I've added another form of poetry from the words of a hymn.

The early Christian community at Colossae also struggled with some of the same issues that were evident in other communities that Paul had planted. It was certainly as much a sign of the times then as it is now for temptations to abound concerning different spiritual practices, or the inclusion of worship of other gods. But Paul has some strong rebuttals to all who wish to let their focus slide from the one main subject of our devotion and sustenance that we heard about in the reading from Luke's Gospel on Sunday. That is, of course, Jesus Christ. So the three main sections that we are going to consider in the reading from Colossians tonight are the identity of Jesus; the practical application to our community of faith; and Paul's personal testimony on the mission of the church.

Hymn number 82 in *The Hymnal 1982* and hymn number 295 in the *Lutheran Book of Worship* is the magnificent song "Of the Father's Love Begotten" written by Marcus Aurelius Clemens Prudentius who lived from 348-413 A.D. Our hymns are a significant part of our tradition – the writings of theologians, prophets and teachers across the centuries – that supplement our understanding of Scripture. How awesome that we still have access to the beautiful words of faith from one of the faithful who lived around the fourth century A.D. Prudentius' hymn closely reflects the teachings of our text from Colossians, the first part of which is also an ancient hymn quite possibly written long before it was incorporated into Paul's letter to the early church. The first section of the hymn in Colossians reads, "Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him, and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together." The first verse of our hymn reads, "Of the Father's love begotten, ere the worlds began to be, he is Alpha and Omega, he the source, the ending he, of the things that are, that have been, and that future years shall see, evermore and evermore!" Many of us who have long loved Scripture or been faithful Christians for some time take it for granted that everyone knows who Jesus is, and the unique and challenging claims that Jesus impresses upon us. I would not go as far as saying familiarity breeds contempt, but I would say that familiarity breeds forgetfulness in each of us. We love the Lord, but we forget the wonder and excitement of discovering who Jesus is, as if for the very first time.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, we have the lovely line of God to Moses, "I AM who I am." In this Scripture, we have an expanded teaching about Jesus, the firstborn of all creation, through whom all things were made, and through whom all things are held together. Jesus is also sovereign over all the rulers, powers, dominions or kingdoms of the world, and the entire cosmos. No exclusions. No exceptions. In other words, no one would ever have even lived without Jesus, and none of us can continue to live except by the grace of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Not incidentally, and quite regardless of all who do not know Jesus, do not believe in Jesus, or choose to turn away from Him – God in Christ is sovereign in all and through all. This is entirely God's doing, and not in the least dependent upon any human confession of faith. Here are some more of those mighty claims that give us the gift of such deep and abiding confidence in our Savior. Jesus is the image of God. Jesus is God incarnate, fully divine and fully human. In that respect, Jesus is entirely unique. Later in the second part of the hymn from Colossians, Jesus is confirmed as the head of the Body that is the

church. Jesus is also named and confirmed as the One through whom God is pleased to reconcile all things to Himself. As we know that work of redemption was accomplished by Jesus on the cross, and through His resurrection we have the hope of eternal life in Him.

Our faith is radically centered on Jesus for good reason. Since Jesus is sovereign over all the rulers, powers, dominions and thrones of the world, when we are faithfully centered in Christ, we cannot be enslaved by anything on earth. Because Jesus is whom He says He is – we are truly liberated, blessed with God’s gracious freedom in Him. There is no way that words can speak adequately to this immeasurable gift. Jesus is the one Lord who loves us unconditionally, forgives our sins and reconciles us to God. Jesus is the one who heals us, sustains us, and gives us the gift of eternal life. If we truly appreciate and live into the fullness of our faith in Christ – we would probably be dancing every day, praising God constantly, and sharing the Good News with everyone we meet. If that is true for you, then Amen and Alleluia! If it is not, then let’s consider what gets between us and Christ on a moment-by-moment basis. Is it one of the powers of the world that is trying to enslave us? Have we given ourselves to worshipping a lesser god from time to time? God’s gift in Christ Jesus is utterly and completely incomparable. The Beatles sang, *All You Need is Love*. The Apostle, Paul’s point here is that all we need is Jesus – who is Love incarnate. Hmm, go figure, maybe the Beatles had it right after all! In another verse from our hymn we have a slightly different way of putting it, “Let the heights of heaven adore him; angel hosts, his praises sing; powers, dominions, bow before him and extol our God and King; let no tongue on earth be silent, every voice in concert ring evermore and evermore.”

From a practical standpoint, Paul speaks to the Colossians directly about being faithful to Christ and the Gospel message. With Christ in all and through all, there is nothing and no one excluded from Christ’s embrace on the cross. Even the enemies of the Lord live within the world that Christ made and sustains. The purpose of Christ’s ministry is reconciliation. That has not changed, and it is also part of our mission as Christians to help others to become reconciled to God in Christ. Just as in the lesson for Martha from Luke’s Gospel, Paul conveys that we must not allow our focus to shift from Christ to anything else, because all we are and all we can be is in Christ and through Christ, who is also our hope. Just as the Colossians were part of the church, so are you and I – we are the Body of Christ, here to continue Christ’s mission to the world, which is to proclaim the Gospel. We love to gather as a community to worship God, but our purpose as a community is not to provide entertainment for those who have made cultural trends and fashions their god. Nor do we gather in order to rigidly maintain the *status quo*, as if the comfort of that safe position is our salvation. We enjoy fellowship with one another, but our mission as Christ’s body extends beyond social functions and networking. The real purpose of the church is to be a community of Christ’s disciples, proclaiming the Good News.

The mystery of God has been revealed in Jesus, according to Paul’s personal testimony. Paul tells us that this is why he has become an apostle and servant of Christ. Paul knows that there is nothing greater we can do or be than to give ourselves to the Lord Jesus with thanksgiving, and to serve Christ faithfully as His ministers in this life. Our hymn puts it this way, “Christ, to thee with God the Father, and O Holy Ghost to thee, hymn and chant and high thanksgiving, and unwearied praises be; honor, glory and dominion, and eternal victory, evermore and evermore!” The victory is already won. The church’s bodily existence in you, me, and all believers, is to carry forward the reconciliation achieved by Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection on behalf of the whole creation. This week, let’s heed the invitation to take a few moments every day to remember who Christ is, rejoice and praise the Lord with thanksgiving for all that He has done for us, and proclaim His glorious name in all we do.

Amen.